
Thorn Hill may be forced to shut down

County schools can't afford it

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Thorn Hill Learning Center may have to close its doors.

Burdened by budget cuts, Franklin County Public Schools can no longer afford to run the center. It plans to sell the old school building that houses GED instruction, community education and after school programs.

Unless Thorn Hill can find a new fiscal agent – or the money to operate independently – it could shut down.

FCPS Superintendent Harrie Buecker spoke to members of the Frankfort/Franklin County Community Education Board of Directors Monday, explaining the district's plan to sell the building as surplus.

The school system would also stop serving as the center's fiscal agent when the financial year ends June 30, 2010.

The Board of Education hasn't voted on either proposal.

THORN HILL | Maintenance, utilities cost more than \$100,000

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About 20 board members and staffers gathered around a table in an art classroom at Thorn Hill for the emergency meeting, prompted by rumors of the surplus.

"At this point, Franklin County Public Schools cannot continue to support the center as we have over the last several years," Buecker said.

Building maintenance and utilities cost the district more than \$100,000 a year, Buecker said. The school system also provides technology support and processes payroll for the Thorn Hill staff.

FCPS faces \$1.2 million less revenue this year, and local educators learned this month that they would lose \$200,405 in state textbook funding.

"We don't have \$100,000 this year," she said. "(But) we will not do anything this school year. We'll do everything we can to keep the doors open."

The surplus process could take several months, the superintendent said, and it would require a vote from

the Board of Education first. A bidding process or auction could follow, though Buecker said she doesn't expect much competition for Thorn Hill.

Buecker says that independence would allow community educators to make their own decisions about the building, without the red tape that binds it to the school district. The state Department of Education only allows school districts to spend construction money on K-12 education, she said.

That has delayed repairs at the facility before. The roof leaks in several places, and the federal dollars earmarked to replace it haven't arrived.

In the room where the board met Monday, a plastic swimming pool sat on the floor, collecting rainwater that dripped from the ceiling. Buecker says the school system can't patch the roof without pulling from its general fund—something it can't afford.

Thorn Hill has an annual budget of about \$850,000. Most of that comes from community education grants

and partnerships with local school districts and city and county governments, said Tom Utterback, chairman of its board.

Utterback said the community education center has been part of the county school district for 28 years.

FCPS contributes \$30,000 annually to community education, and Buecker says that will continue. Frankfort Independent Schools gives \$5,000 a year.

Kentucky State University gave \$30,000 until June, when it announced the contribution would end because of tough economic times. That put community education in a \$60,000 hole—\$30,000 for the fiscal year that just ended June 30, and another installment that was already budgeted for 2010.

"Finances are shaky here already...until I see something on paper that says Thorn Hill can make it as an independent entity, I'm very concerned," said Mary Lynn Collins, a member of Thorn Hill's advisory board.

"Really I think were talking about maybe closing the

doors here."

Judge-Executive Ted Collins said that shouldn't be an option.

"We've got to keep this thing up and running," he said. "We need to get our heads together to find a way to keep it up and running."

Buecker said the center's nonprofit foundation, incorporated in May to raise money for its operation, could run it independently. So far, the foundation has gathered about \$9,000 in donations.

The center could also partner with a community college or Kentucky State University. She favored that kind of arrangement because it allows students to transition from earning their GED to college work.

Harold Benson, director

of KSU's Land Grant Program, said the university has a growing enrollment and a dropping budget. But he said he would present the idea to university President Mary Sias.

"Don't close the door on the options that might be available, because we too realize the worth of Thorn Hill in this community," he said. "We want to be an active player to the extent that dollars will allow us to play."

Sen. Julian Carroll, who attended Monday's meeting, praised the center's role in educating hundreds of Franklin County residents every year—more than 100 earned GEDs last year. He said 70 percent of incarcerated Kentuckians dropped out of high school.

"I'm trying very diligently to get state government people to understand that we've got to make an investment to keep our kids in school," he said.

"If they don't go to school, they're going to prison—statistically that's where they'll end up."

Community education also has 25 employees to consider. They could lose their retirement, health insurance and benefits.

Buecker said the county schools would assist Thorn Hill in finding a solution to the split.

"I know the miracles that go on every day," she said. "I want Franklin County Public Schools to be seen as a full supporter of what goes on every day here."